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FOREIGN LANGUAGES FOR CHILDREN--WHAT RESEARCH SAYS.

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A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE RESEARCH ON FLES REVEALS THE NEED FOR GREATER STUDY IN MANY AREAS IN ORDER TO FULLY EVALUATE FLES PROGRAMS. SOME FINDINGS INDICATE THAT YOUNG CHILDREN CAN ACQUIRE PRONUNCIATION SKILLS MORE RAPIDLY AND EASILY THAN ADULTS, BUT IN OTHER AREAS OF LANGUAGE STUDY THERE IS A STRONG POSSIBILITY THAT THE TIME SPENT IN STUDY IS A MORE IMPORTANT FACTOR THAN AGE. RESEARCH HAS NOT YET DETERMINED AT WHAT GRADE FLES SHOULD BEGIN, ONLY THAT AN EARLY START WILL ALLOW MORE TOTAL TIME FOR LANGUAGE STUDY. THERE IS A NEED FOR FURTHER STUDY ON (1) INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE APTITUDE, (2) LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF FLES ON LATER LANGUAGE STUDY, AND (3) THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DIFFERENT INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUES AND AIDS. THIS ARTICLE IS REPRINTED FROM "THE NATIONAL ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL," VOLUME 39, NUMBER 6, MAY 1960. (SS)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES FOR CHILDREN

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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What Research Says

by
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Despite the increasing popularity of foreign language instruction in the elementary school (FLES), research has thus far said very little either about what benefits can be expected of such programs or about how to conduct them. It is difficult to find solid facts in the mass of literature in this field. For a variety of reasons, there have been few instances in which competent research workers have come to the aid of FLES teachers in designing suitable measuring instruments and in scientifically evaluating FLES instruction.

Among the few more or less self-evident facts that probably do not require complete experimental demonstration is that many children are able to learn a second language quite readily and easily. The extreme case, of course, is that in which the child essentially learns two (or more) native languages simultaneously. A less extreme case is that in which the kindergarten or first-grade child is required to learn, as a second language, the language of instruction in the school. In our own country, this is true for many Navaho Indian children in the Southwest as well as for Puerto Rican children on the Eastern Seaboard. There is enough experience with such programs to state positively that the younger the child, the better and faster he learns English. Further, the children will learn best when they hear other children already using the second language correctly. In the case of Puerto Ricans learning English in New York, it has been found best to put the children in classes with some native-English-speaking children.¹

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The FLES movement, however, concerns an American, native-English-speaking child being given instruction in a foreign language--like French, Spanish, German, or Russian--for short periods of time spaced throughout the school week. This situation is hardly comparable to the one mentioned above; yet, if we are to believe the impressionistic reports, many children do quite well.

DO CHILDREN LEARN LANGUAGES FASTER?

Before we could answer this question, we would need to measure how much the typical child can learn in a given amount of time under a skilled foreign language teacher, as compared with adolescents or adults under comparable conditions. The best available information relates specifically to children's ability to learn accurate pronunciation of foreign languages.

Max Kirch had the opportunity to teach German in the first, third, and sixth grades.² While he made no attempt to measure rates of learning at the various levels, he asserted that "the ability of all children to reproduce foreign sounds not present in English seemed to be in inverse proportion to their age," hastening to add, however, that even the sixth graders were far superior to typical university students in pronunciation.

Probably the most extensive and well-thought-out program of FLES research is that being conducted by Dunkel and Pillet at the University of Chicago Elementary School.³ This program involves unselected children in grades three and four and has been following the children through three or more years of instruction. At the end of two years of 20 minutes of French a day, 11 percent of the children were rated as having "near-perfect" pronunciation, and 36 percent superior pronunciation, and 39 percent "comparable to the average adult learner," leaving only 14 percent with "real problems" in pronunciation.

There is, then, some solid basis for the belief that young children can acquire good pronunciation more rapidly and easily than adults can under normal conditions.

What about other phases of language learning? Dunkel and Pillet gave a general test of French to their second year elementary school class and to several college classes in the first and second quarters. The elementary school pupils were not too far behind the college students; in fact, in one comparison, one fifth of the children were above the median of the college student.

The fact that it is too easy to make the mistake of inferring that children parroting dialogue and singing songs are really advanced in their FL skills is pointed up by Dunkel and Pillet's observation that even at the end of the second year "the children's ability to speak spontaneously was somewhat disappointing when put to impromptu test."⁴ The children needed more practice in varying the set patterns they had learned.

It is difficult to evaluate the research results obtained so far because it is hard to compare the amounts of time actually spent by the students. It is quite possible that time spent is a more crucial factor than age as such.

In fact, except possibly with regard to the learning of pronunciation, there is considerable doubt that young children learn FL's any better and faster, given the same opportunities and amount of time. Many years ago, E.L. Thorndike⁵ concluded, on the basis of experiments in teaching Esperanto to children and adults: "We are convinced that the gain made in 50, or 100, or 500 hours of study of French, or German, or Spanish, or Italian by a group of any age from 20 to 40 will be greater than the gain made by a group of 8, 10, or 12 of equal native capacity." My own studies have shown that among

adults of age 20 to 60, age has very little if anything to do with success in learning a language if the instruction is good and the student's motivation is high. Many adults can, in fact, learn to speak a foreign language with quite adequate pronunciation ability.

If the sheer amount of time spent on language learning is the most important variable, the question of whether young children can learn faster and better than adolescents and adults may be somewhat irrelevant. From the standpoint of educational policy, one simply has to consider the advantages of giving FL instruction in relatively small doses over a long period of time rather than in more concentrated doses at the high school level.

Perhaps one reason why research evidence gives no definite answer is that the method and content of instruction has to be adapted to the age level of the learner. Young children can be taught by what may be called a "pure" audio-lingual approach which can delay the introduction of any form of written material for a long time. As the child grows older, however, he finds increasing need of written material as aids to language learning, and instruction can be safely made more analytical than with young children.

When Should FLES Begin?

If research does not clearly indicate whether learning in general is better in childhood or adulthood, still less does it indicate exactly when FL instruction "should" begin. One can find reports of successful FL teaching at every grade level. Kirch felt on the basis of his experience that it should start as early as possible--certainly by first grade, while Dryer⁶ recommended fifth grade as a starting point. Dunkel and Pillet found no significant difference between children who started in grade three versus grade four, but still felt justified in recommending grade three as the starting point on the ground that more total time for language learning would be available to the child in elementary school years.

Individual Differences in FL Aptitude

Extensive studies of my own have shown considerable individual differences in aptitude for learning foreign languages. This is true of young children as well as adolescents and adults. Even if it should be found that young children learn languages faster than older children, there are many who will have real difficulty. Reports typically say that 10 to 20 percent of children have special disability for FL learning even under what appear to be excellent learning conditions.

It has commonly been supposed that FL aptitude is related to general intelligence. It may indeed be true that certain kinds of FL instruction place a premium on general intelligence, but my own research findings suggest this is not the case for courses taught with proper emphasis on speaking and hearing the foreign language. In Cleveland, under the so-called "Cleveland Plan" of FL instruction for

gifted children in grades one to six, a substantial number of children of high intelligence were not doing as well as might otherwise be expected; my tests showed that these children seemed to be lacking in language aptitude. Therefore, although gifted children on the average may do better in foreign languages, it is probably a mistake to select children for FL instruction on the basis of intelligence test scores.

It is probably also a mistake to select children on the basis of reading skill, because present day audio-lingual methods put no stress on reading skills until the child has been well started in using the spoken foreign language, and some poor readers get much encouragement from their success in foreign languages.

If children are selected at all, a short preliminary trial of language learning success would probably be the best presently available method. Children who can imitate foreign language sentences quickly and accurately are most likely to succeed. It would seem that FL learning ability is almost a special talent like musical or artistic ability (but independent of these, of course).

The 10 to 20 percent of children who have a distinct lack of ability in FL's may be otherwise normal or above average in other school subjects. According to Dunkel and Pillet (and others), they do not seem to be much helped by extra drill or by being put into special groups; the fact is that we do not yet know how to help these children, and serious consideration should be given to the possible desirability of withdrawing them from FL instruction.

Long-Term Effects of FLES

No reports are available to give solid answers to such questions as: How long do children retain their knowledge of FL's acquired in the elementary school? Do children taught a foreign language in elementary school have any advantage when they study the same foreign language in high school or college? Do they have any advantage when they study a different FL in high school or college? How well can an adult relearn a language studied as a child? The substantial longitudinal studies necessary to answer these questions urgently need to be started.

The scanty researches available do not give much comfort. Price found that fourth year French students in an Eastern girls' prep school who had had eight or more years of French previously made somewhat higher scores on a College Board French Test than those with only four to seven previous years of French.⁷ Justman and Nass studied 100 pairs of high school students matched in sex, age, and IQ but differing in whether they had had FL training (French and Spanish) in elementary school.⁸ The results may be roughly summarized by the statement that students with previous FL training tended to get slightly better marks than their controls in the first high school language course they entered, but were barely able to maintain superiority in subsequent courses. The net effect of the elementary school training was a saving of a semester or two for the 45 students

(out of 100) who had been allowed to enter a high school language course at an advanced level.

In both these studies, however, no account could be taken of the possible variations in the quality of elementary school FL training given the children. For all we know, children who receive continuous and superior FL instruction in elementary school might show impressive superiority over high school and college students without such training. A further difficulty with these studies is that the results are in terms of written test scores or teachers' grades which may fail to reflect the kinds of gains in speaking and pronunciation that may have been achieved by the children trained in elementary school.

Effects of FLES on Other Subjects

There are no research reports of any adverse effect of FLES on progress in other school subjects. Geigle found that standardized achievement test scores (in reading, arithmetic, language usage, and spelling) of children who had had a year of French (20 minutes daily) in the third grade were distributed very much like those of children tested in previous years before the introduction of the French program.⁹

The concerns of those who fear that FL study will cause psychological interference with study of the native language are probably completely unfounded. Even in psychological research on learning it is hard to produce interference effects except under special experimental conditions unlikely to occur in actual school situations.

There is no danger, either, that FLES will lead to the adverse effects alleged to ensue from bilingualism, because FLES programs in American schools are rarely so intensive as to lead to virtual bilingualism. There is very grave doubt, in any case, that bilingualism has any adverse effects on mental development.

Instructional Techniques for FLES

The most important insight into methods of teaching FLES comes from traditional educational research but from a consideration of the nature of language as primarily a spoken means of communication. It is natural to start language study by learning to understand and speak simple phrases and sentences before one tries to read or write them. It has been shown that premature exposure to the written form of Spanish resulted in poorer pronunciation than when auditory presentation alone was used.¹⁰ This gives rise to what has sometimes been called the "lag principle": always let there be a lag between the introduction of a given language item in its spoken form and its introduction in written form. Dunkel and Pillet did this by having their grade three and four pupils memorize the dialogue of a

little play at the end of the first year, after which they were introduced to the script in written form.

Although it cannot be said on the basis of research results that reading and writing should not be introduced before grade three or four, it would seem wisest not to do so, because in this way one can capitalize on the ease with which young children can handle the spoken aspects of language without needing written materials.

The child must have good models of speech to imitate. For rather obvious reasons, there are no research reports concerning the effect of the teacher's foreign language competence, but various bits of evidence can be pieced together to suggest that this effect is very important. Pickrel, Neidt, and Givson found that grade seven children can learn effectively from tapes prepared by an expert language teacher,¹¹ but it is probably still true that a live second-language-competent teacher in the classroom--either regular or "itinerant"--is preferable to a tape recording. There are no research reports as yet concerning the effectiveness of televised language teaching, but it is undoubtedly of critical importance for the classroom teacher to supplement such teaching.

All the reports of successful FLES teaching stress the importance of carrying on class work in the foreign language, without the use of English. Materials are now available for most of the commonly taught languages which will enable the teacher to carry on lively classroom activities in which the children learn simple commands, questions, dialogues, songs, plays, and the like. There seems to be something special about games, for Loucks found that retention was better for Spanish words learned in games than in dialogues.¹² Nevertheless, there is no one method which should be emphasized. Comparing three methods of instruction emphasizing, respectively, vocabulary, structure learning, and "experiential" learning, Morrison found that each method has its own particular advantages and concluded that the ideal method is a combination of methods.¹³

As Morrison puts it, "The best learning will be achieved through daily, purposeful, systematic instruction in the vocabulary, the language patterns, the sounds, rhythm and intonation of (the language being taught) in a stimulating experiential social setting."

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